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Review

# An Overview of the Current State of Women's Leadership in Higher Education in Saudi Arabia and a Proposal for Future Research Directions

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**Abstract:** Despite the predominance of perspectives on women's leadership, which consistently emphasize the underrepresentation of women in virtually every sphere of political and economic life in countries around the world, very little is known about women's leadership, especially in higher education, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This has resulted in a gap in the literature, since higher education is one area of employment where Saudi women have made progress, and in spite of complex social, religious, cultural and organisational barriers, some have broken through the glass ceiling into higher education leadership. One goal of this paper is to highlight, through a synthesis of existing literature, the current state of women's higher education leadership in Saudi Arabia. The second goal of this paper is to propose new directions for future research to address the current dearth of empirical work on women's leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia. This may be relevant to other regions of the Middle East and elsewhere.

**Keywords:** Saudi Arabia; women; higher education; leadership research

## 1. Introduction

Despite the predominance of perspectives on women's leadership, which consistently emphasize the underrepresentation of women in virtually every sphere of political and economic life in countries around the world, very little is known about women and leadership, especially in the context of higher education, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) ([Abalkhail 2017](#)). Akin to academic imperialism ([Dupre 1994](#)), much of the literature concerning women and leadership (including higher education contexts), predominantly emerges from scholarship in western contexts. When Saudi Arabian women are the centre of attention, it is usually in non-academic articles that 'promote stereotypical images of Saudi women as exotic and erotic' ([Hamdan 2005](#), p. 61), or as shrouded victims of oppression ([Shannon 2014](#)). Yet, Saudi Arabia is more complex than such articles imply and a fascinating case to study. Within this deeply conservative society, modernity, juxtaposed with tradition ([Gorney 2016](#)), and 'gender politics and religion', are all intertwined ([Al-Rasheed and Azzam 2012](#), p. 7). On the one hand, women are redefining the boundaries of what modernity and economic empowerment means ([Gorney 2016](#)). Indeed, the country has witnessed some noteworthy improvements in women's status in social, political, and economic life over the past two decades. But those improvements contrast sharply with fierce criticism from activists and the media of legislation and practices that curtail women's rights ([Shannon 2014](#)). These criticisms arise first and foremost because Saudi Arabia is one of the most gender segregated countries in the world. Secondly, under male guardianship (mahram), policy, every woman must obtain permission from a male guardian—usually her husband or father, but possibly even her brother or son—to access education, to travel, work and to obtain medical treatment, to gain permits, and so forth ([Forsythe 2009](#), p. 396). This can

create challenges for women who wish to pursue a career as they must obtain permission from their male guardian. Added to this, once in the workplace, women contend with an array of complex laws, rules, and social practices, which impact on their day-to-day working practice and freedom of movement ([Abalkhail 2017](#)).

Although research concerned with women and leadership in higher education in Saudi Arabia is limited, one goal of this paper is to highlight, through a synthesis of existing literature, the current state of Saudi Arabian women's higher education leadership in Saudi Arabia. A second goal of this paper is to propose directions for future research. We believe this is a novel contribution that will be relevant to those in the academic community, as well as PhD candidates formulating proposals for research, and existing doctoral researchers undertaking studies of the region. It may also be of interest to policy makers and government bodies in the Middle East, particularly those who sponsor research. In addition, although the focus of the paper is on women native to Saudi Arabia, many of the issues discussed will be relevant and, therefore, of interest to Western women or women from neighbouring countries who seek or are in leadership roles in higher education in the KSA.

The paper opens with a brief explanation of the methods and materials used in this desk-based study. This is followed by an historical profile of the KSA, focusing on the development of education for females, then women's participation in higher education, to provide insight into this unique and complex culture, and women's position within it. Next, we outline gender gaps in Saudi Arabia. After that, we focus on women's leadership in higher education, then we explore barriers to leadership, first drawing on empirical evidence from the Middle East, then more specifically Saudi Arabia. We briefly draw comparisons with evidence from Western contexts. This brings us to the second goal of this paper, to propose new directions for future research. The paper closes with concluding comments.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The paper is based on desk-based research that involved searching academic online databases and use of the google search engine to source material. We assessed the scope, content, accuracy, as well as the authority and relevance of the articles, reports and web-based material used in this paper following guidance for finding, retrieving and evaluating journal and web based information ([Graham 2007](#); [Metzger 2007](#)). Most sources were from peer reviewed journals. We supplemented those with reports on the region, where appropriate.

We were particularly committed to providing a platform for local studies conducted in Saudi Arabia or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, which are often rendered peripheral to mainstream literature from western contexts in scholarly journals. In this sense, we offer a novel contribution that seeks to privilege and legitimate local studies ([Milligan 2016](#)), rather than giving centre stage to the mainstream, Western-focused literature, which predominantly reflects and privileges European, Canadian and north American cultures, for example. However, we have drawn on the mainstream literature, in places, to explore if any of the obstacles to women's leadership bear a resemblance to barriers identified in Saudi Arabia.

In terms of our positionality as researchers and our expertise in the study context, it is important to relay that the first author of this paper is a native Saudi Arabian woman who is a doctoral researcher in the UK, with research interests in educational leadership and management in Saudi Arabia. She is also a well-known liberal journalist in Saudi Arabia. As a 'cultural insider', with lived experience of the social, legislative and political conditions that impact on women, she is reflexive about her degree of social proximity and personal standpoint on the issues facing women in the Kingdom. The second author of this paper is a UK academic with expertise in women's leadership, and experience in the supervision of doctoral research in educational leadership and management in the KSA and other GCC states. She is reflexive of her position as a cultural outsider and the dilemmas this presents understanding 'others' ([England 1994](#)).

### 3. An Historical Profile of Saudi Arabia—Women and Education

An appreciation of the historical socio-economic and political conditions of Saudi Arabia is essential to understanding women's position in Saudi society (Hamdan 2005, p. 42). Within this deeply conservative nation, gender politics and religion are inextricably linked (Al-Rasheed and Azzam 2012). While Saudi Arabia is governed by a monarchy, with a Council of Ministers nominated by the King who formulate and implement policies, the constitution is governed by strict interpretation of Islamic law (Mobaraki and Söderfeldt 2010), one of the main characteristics of which pertains to 'the power struggle between the 'ulamā [religious scholars] and the state' (Mai 2000, p. 95). Women are frequently at the centre of discussion and debate between the two. We explore this first in the case of education for females.

At the formation of the modern state of Saudi Arabia in 1932, it was a poor country with just 12 schools and 700 students, educating only boys (Alamari 2011). The discovery of oil in 1938 led to exponential wealth creation, which by the 1940s enabled some elite families to travel to other countries. As they did so, their views on girls' education changed, causing many to enrol their daughters in informal schools upon their return to Saudi Arabia (Altorki 1986). In 1953, the Ministry of Education was founded, with public schools for boys opening for the first time (Al-Munajjed 1997). It was King Faisal and his wife Iffat Al Thunayan who zealously lobbied for education for girls, but they faced fierce objection from religious scholars (Hamdan 2005). In 1956, the first private school for girls opened in Jeddah, in spite of continuing opposition from factions of religious scholars ('ulamā') who claimed education would corrupt girls' morals and destroy the foundations of the Saudi Muslim family (Geel 2016). Although King Faisal and his wife fervently supported women's rights, it took some time to convince the public, and it was only through the use of Islamic teachings that this was achieved (Hamdan 2005). Hamdan (2005), citing Lacey (1981, p. 368), explains how the King would respond to resistance by asking 'is there anything in the Holy Qur'an which forbids the education of women? He also stated: 'We have no cause for argument, God enjoins learning on every Muslim man and woman'. Illustrative of the power of religious scholars, it was only after they were reassured that the girls schooling was in accordance with Islam that they gave their approval, and only then that conservative families sent their girls to school (Al-Munajjed 1997). In 1960 education for girls was expanded with a school in Riyadh (Al-Rawaf and Simmons 1991). While this era marks the beginning of formal education for girls, it also represents the beginning of gender segregation (Geel 2016), and the extensive development of women-only public spaces (Doumato 2009; Hamdan 2005; Geel 2016), which has caused Saudi Arabia to be dubbed the most gender segregated nation on Earth (Gorney 2016).

Gradual acceptance of school education led to the development of higher education. The first university, King Saud University, was established in 1957 and a further six universities opened over the following twenty years, together with the establishment of the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia (Alamari 2011). Higher education was made available to women from 1962 and in 1970 the first college for women was established to provide female teachers (Alaugab 2007). This was followed by many more public and private universities and colleges for women (Al Alhareth et al. 2013). However, it was only in 2002 that the administration of education for females was taken over by the Ministry of Education. Prior to 2002, education for females was administered by the Department of Religious Guidance to ensure it did not deviate from its original purpose to 'make women good wives and mothers, and to prepare them for 'acceptable' jobs such as teaching and nursing that were believed to suit their nature' (Hamdan 2005, p. 44).

### 4. Women's Participation in Higher Education

Despite fervent objection to education for females and concerns that it would be useless and even dangerous, education has increased dramatically over the past few decades (Hamdan 2005). This is particularly the case since King Abdullah ascended the throne in 2005 (Pavan 2016). In fact, there are currently 36 universities across the country (Ministry Of Education 2017). E-learning has also

gained popularity, especially among women unable to access mainstream higher education provision (Al Alhareth et al. 2013). In accordance with cultural conventions, men and women are segregated in education and subjects are more limited for women (Hamdan 2005). This is because it is socially unacceptable for women to pursue certain careers and they are forbidden from studying some subjects in Saudi Arabia (Mobaraki and Söderfeldt 2010). To overcome these limitations, many families send their daughters abroad to study the specialisms closed to them (Hamdan 2005). However, over the past decade some restrictions have been lifted, for example, since 2007 women have been permitted to study law (Meijer 2010), and the door was opened for the first woman to gain a Master's degree in archaeology in 2009 (Al-Sudairy 2017).

Aligned with the philosophy of gender segregation, there are some universities for men, such as King Fahad University of Petroleum and Minerals and the Islamic University. Universities for women include Princess Nora bint Abdul Rahman University, which entrusted the first female as rector, making a female equal to male counterparts at other Saudi universities for the first time in the nation's history (Almansour and Kempner 2016). The university is also staffed entirely by women (Meijer 2010; Al-Sudairy 2017). In recent years, some co-ed universities have been created, although men and women are still segregated into sections (campuses), one for men and one for women, and they study separately. There is only one university where segregation does not occur, allowing both male and female students to study together, that is, the King Abdullah's University of Science and Technology (Ministry Of Education 2017).

Over the past decade, the government has put in place reform plans to diversify revenue from oil and gas. Gargantuan investment in education further demonstrates this is a top policy priority for the government. For instance, a five-year education plan announced in 2014 was estimated to be worth 80 billion riyals or \$21.33 billion to the education sector (Reuters 2014). Much of this investment was directed to higher education. In 2005, the King Abdullah Sponsorship Programme (KASP) was established (Taylor and Albasri 2014). This programme offers Saudi students a range of opportunities, which include studying abroad in western countries such as the United Kingdom and USA. Drawing on the Saudi statistical yearbook for the years 2012–2013, Manail (2015) reports there were approximately 150,109 males and 49,176 females (roughly a 3:1 ratio) studying abroad. Current statistics from the Ministry of Education Statistics Center (2017) indicate the number of females undertaking a PhD in a western country is 5165. This figure equates to 41.91% of Saudi students who study for a PhD in a western country. It is now widely agreed that many Saudi women have made phenomenal advancements in education, as witnessed in the exponential rise in the number of women accessing higher education to gain graduate and postgraduate degrees (Hamdan 2005; Islam 2014; Khan and Varshney 2013; Parveen 2014; Ministry of Higher Education 2010).

## 5. Gender Gaps

Despite significant progress in the areas outlined thus far, much more needs to be done for women to achieve gender equality in Saudi Arabia. As women's rights is deemed a marker of progress, considerable attention has been given to the nation's gender gap (Shannon 2014). Evidence from the Global Gender Gap Report, produced annually by the World Economic Forum (2016), ranks the KSA 141 out of 144 countries in the World for gender parity, and third lowest among 18 countries in the Middle East and North Africa region. The gender gap extends to many areas of a woman's life (Table 1), and presents a generally gloomy, but somewhat mixed picture. For instance, on the one hand, the country is ranked 105 for educational attainment, but, reflecting the advancements in women's education outlined in this paper, it has also been ranked as the fifth most improved country in the world for its education. Presenting an even more polarized picture, although it is ranked almost at the lowest end of the scale for economic participation and opportunities for women, a more promising 57th position is achieved for labour force participation among those with advanced degrees. Still, despite the fact that more educated women are making advancements in the labour force, it is of concern that the KSA is ranked lowest in the world when it comes to women achieving a high income (US \$12,736



or more) (World Economic Forum 2016). A report from the OECD (2016) notes Saudi Arabia has the largest gender gap in employment rates at all levels of educational attainment, across all OECD and partner countries. The report highlights that women educated to tertiary level have less than half the employment rate of similarly educated men.

**Table 1.** Global gender gap index (World Economic Forum 2016).

Key Indicators	Rank
Global Gender Gap Index	141
Economic participation and opportunity	142
Educational attainment	105
Health and survival	128
Political empowerment	121
Rank out of	144

Nevertheless, some Saudi women have enjoyed career success, as illustrated by labour force statistics which show an increase from 14% in 1990 to 21% in 2016 in women's employment (World Economic Forum 2016). Albeit that this is in a limited sphere of sectors, as Saudi women are predominantly restricted to careers in sectors such as health care and education (Al-Ahmadi 2011). To overcome the limited career choices available, many Saudi women pursue success through entrepreneurship (Azzam 1996; Welsh et al. 2014).

## 6. Women and Higher Education Leadership

Reflecting the rise in educated women in Saudi Arabia, one area of employment where women have made strong progress is higher education. The number of female lecturers increased from 4700 in 2003/2004 to approximately 19,600 in 2008/2009. That corresponds to an increase of 7200 to around 48,800 male lecturers over the same period (Al Alhareth et al. 2015, p. 11). Precisely because women make up a reasonably good proportion of higher education faculty, and education is segregated by gender, this should create opportunities for women who aspire to higher education leadership, particularly in female only universities (Alomair 2015). However, female academics tend to hold lower level positions (Al-Ohali and Al-Mehrej 2012; Jamjoom and Kelly 2013). Thus, in common with other countries, the rise in educated women and female faculty is not matched by the proportion of women in higher education leadership.

It is particularly shocking, since education is one of the few careers available to women, that more women have not advanced into educational leadership. One key explanation is that historically women have been prevented from occupying positions of leadership in Saudi Arabia due to strict cultural conventions and legislative restrictions. In fact, historically, according to Smith (1987, p. 34), the education system itself subjugated women to 'ensure that at every level of competence and leadership there will be a place for them that is inferior and subordinate to the positions of men.' Significant to the reversal of this situation is a ruling announced by the king of Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz on 23 February 2009 that granted Saudi women the freedom to be leaders. Underlining the King's commitment to advancing women's leadership and specifically women's role in educational leadership, the King immediately announced that the first woman to be appointed to a leadership position would be Deputy Minister of Education. Subsequently, a wide range of government policies has begun to reverse the deficit of women leaders. A significant example is the Shura Council, which appointed 30 women members in 2015. It is also of note that the women were not excluded to a female only area, instead they participated among men and were received by the King and his Crown Princess (Al-Sudairy 2017). Another milestone is the right from 2015 for women to be nominated in municipal elections. Nine hundred women put themselves forward for the first elections, resulting in 37 women holding seats (Al-Sudairy 2017).

Still, women are a long way from achieving parity with men, both in the workplace and in social spheres of life. Reports indicate that just 3.2% of women that hold senior leadership positions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Pande and Ford 2011; Patel and Buiting 2013), and the figure of 1% has been reported from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)) (Sperling et al. 2014).

Table 2 illustrates statistics specifically relating to women's leadership in higher education. The highest position reported is the role of dean at Princess Nora Bint Abdul Rahman University (a female only university). The second highest position is vice (deputy) dean at a co-ed university. There are 12 women vice deans (presidents) in other universities, such as King Abdullah University of Science and Technology, or vice (deputy) deans for women's sections (campuses), such as King Faisal's and King Saud's Universities. Some universities are considered women's colleges (sections or campuses) because the deanship is subsumed under the Presidency of Academic Affairs. The dean's responsibilities are restricted to women only. However, there are several deans' faculties where women have more responsibilities for women and men. For instance, at Jizan University the Dean of Community Service and Sustainable Development is responsible for both women and men, as is the Dean of the Arts and Design. Women have made stronger advancements in gaining positions as vice (deputy) dean of colleges (campuses), as shown in table one. Most of their responsibilities are for girls' colleges and campuses. Thus, within those institutional contexts, women have crossed boundaries to roles previously designated only for men. Although the number of women in higher education leadership is still finite, this marks an important turning point for women's leadership in Saudi Arabia.

**Table 2.** Saudi female leaders in higher education (Ministry Of Education 2017)<sup>1</sup>.

Position	N (%) Women	N (%) Men
Director of university	1 (3.1%)	33 (3%)
Vice President	12	128 (9.3%)
Dean	61	330 (18.4%)
Deputy dean of faculty	228	542 (42%)
Total	302	1033(29.2%)

In the section that follows we draw on empirical research from the region to explore key barriers to women's leadership in the Middle East and, more specifically, Saudi Arabia, which we compare to evidence from Western contexts.

## 7. Barriers to Leadership

### 7.1. Evidence from the Middle East

A small but growing strand of studies concerned with women's careers and, more specifically, women in leadership and management has emerged from the Middle East in the past decade. This includes, for example: Jordan and Oman (Metcalf 2006) Bahrain (Metcalf 2006, 2007); Lebanon (Sidani et al. 2015; Tlaiss 2014; Tlaiss and Dirani 2015); Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE (Abalkhail and Allan 2016) as well as comparative studies within Middle East states (Metcalf 2008). This body of work highlights a wide range of factors that are fundamental to understanding the underrepresentation of women in leadership (and the workplace) in the region. In particular, combined studies by Metcalf (2006, 2007, 2008, 2011) and a systematic review by Kauser and Tlaiss (2011) highlight cultural practices that guide interpretations of women's right to work and define gender role expectations. In particular, studies show that traditional gender hierarchies and patriarchal organisational structures benefit men by providing access to important individual and family networks (Metcalf 2007). That is not to say

<sup>1</sup> Data sourced from information provided by universities, accessed through the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia website.



women cannot benefit from *Wasta*, meaning ‘a social network of interpersonal connections, rooted in family and kinship ties’ (Abalkhail and Allan 2016, p. 162). Indeed, this can provide women with connections to gain professional opportunities, and it is the easiest route to gain professional influence; however, women must rely directly on male family members to facilitate wider social connections (Doumato 2010). Within patriarchal structures, masculine leadership traits flourish while women suffer from age-old gender stereotypes that view women as best suited to roles as mothers and wives (Sidani et al. 2015).

## 7.2. Evidence from Saudi Arabia

Empirical evidence from professional workplace settings in Saudi Arabia suggests that Saudi female managers are as effective as their male counterparts, and they even score slightly higher than men (Al-Shamrani 2015). Still, professional women in Saudi Arabia face many challenges in the workplace. Hodges (2017) categorizes these as social, religious, cultural and organisational. Generally, across various industries women suffer from:

‘lack of mobility; the salience of gender stereotypes; gender discrimination in the workplace’ limited opportunities for growth, development, and career advancement; excessive workload caused by a lack of family-work balance; and gender-based challenges related to dealing with pregnancy’. (Al-Asfour et al. 2017, p. 184)

Focusing specifically on higher education in Saudi Arabia, Abalkhail (2017) explored the challenges and opportunities for women and leadership in interviews with 22 women in two Saudi higher education institutions. The findings reveal that despite possessing higher qualifications, and having longer experience than their male counterparts, the participants believed that men were given preference in recruitment processes for leadership roles. They attributed this to cultural reasons and power linked to religious views. The findings suggest that gender segregation impedes women from participating in strategic meetings and restricts access to important information and resources. Discriminatory practices in promotion and lack of training were also reported. Nevertheless, participants believed education and support from male family members can facilitate the path to leadership.

Other research in Saudi Arabia highlights that participation in the public sphere, such as academic conferences, is challenging for female academics due to family obligations and cultural issues related to transportation and international travel. In fact, the authors of the study note the women exhibited ‘extraordinary will’ and had to overcome many impediments to participate in the public sphere (Almansour and Kempner 2016, p. 883).

Most prior empirical work is small scale and qualitative, therefore, the findings from a quantitative study with 78 faculty members in three universities in the Riyadh region of Saudi Arabia provide useful additional insights (Alsubaihi 2016). The findings confirm those by Abalkhail (2017), by highlighting that women suffer from limited opportunities for engagement in strategic decision making, especially due to centralized decision making and the limited powers granted to women leaders. Similarly, Almansour and Kempner (2016) cite several papers presented at a symposium at King Faisal University in 2006, that raise concerns about the exclusion of women deans from important decisions and meetings (Alsayeg 2006; Almobaireek 2006; Bobshait 2006, cited in Almansour and Kempner 2016). Research also highlights lack of empowerment, and personal challenges that create obstacles to leadership for women in higher education (Alsubaihi 2016).

Other critical problems for women leaders include financial, cultural and empowerment issues (Abukudair 2012, cited in Almansour and Kempner 2016). Additionally, Almengash (2009) notes poor standards for leadership, such as inadequate guidelines, poor job descriptions as well as multiple male and female department directors, which results in communication problems, poor coordination and conflict.

### 7.3. Comparison of Barriers to Leadership in Western Contexts

Many of the findings from studies in the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, bear an uncanny resemblance to the significant barriers to leadership experienced by women in other parts of the world (Morley 2013a; Reilly and Quirin 2015). More specifically, for example, studies in Western contexts similarly highlight obstacles such as masculinized organisational cultures (Benschop and Brouns 2003; Leathwood and Read 2009), which bind men together into a hierarchy in which they can flourish (Fenton 2003). Patriarchal cultures that privilege masculine leadership traits often lie beneath the misrecognition of women's leadership capabilities (Morley 2013b), and low perceptions of their capabilities as leaders (Benschop and Brouns 2003). The qualities expected for leadership become normalized in recruitment processes, putting women at a disadvantage (Grummell et al. 2009). Homosociality silences and excludes women from social and professional networks (Fotaki 2013). Other obstacles include limited role models, mentoring and leadership training and development for women (Morley 2013a). Studies in western contexts also point to bias in performance evaluation (Fletcher et al. 2007). Thus, women in the western world experience marginalization and devaluation (Fotaki 2013) in many comparable ways to women in the Middle East. Extensive research also shows that women suffer the double burden of family obligations (Probert 2005), and even for women without such responsibilities, 'the abjected maternal body is displaced onto all women (whether they are mothers or not)' and 'conflated with the feminine' (Fotaki 2013, p. 1257).

While women in Saudi Arabia experience many of the same barriers as women in other parts of the world, their situation is profoundly more complex as they are caught in a unique mix between religion and culture (Al Alhareth et al. 2015).

## 8. Proposed New Research Directions

There is a dearth of contextually based research on women's careers in Arab countries, especially in Saudi Arabia (Abalkhail 2017). The limited evidence that is available clearly shows that women face many challenges that prevent them from achieving equitable status with men in the workplace. However, shifts in policy and new initiatives to support women's leadership in Saudi Arabia have the potential to bring about change. Much more research is needed to understand the current state of women's leadership in the country and to monitor the impact of new policies and initiatives. Fundamentally, research in the Arab region needs new directions. The very small stream of studies concerned with women and leadership, including those conducted in higher education, focus predominantly on the challenges women face (Alomair 2015). Furthermore, it is often assumed that studies from one Arab state are applicable to another, when in fact although the GCC states share many commonalities, each nation has its own unique characteristics that are deserving of scholarly attention (Sidani and Gardner 2000). Future research must also account for the heterogeneity that exists within Saudi Arabia, by exploring not only the main urban areas of the country but also regions that are more traditional and rural. In the discussion that follows, we revisit key debates identified in the literature and propose new directions for future empirical work.

First and foremost, within Arab states, gender politics and religion are intertwined (Al-Rasheed and Azzam 2012). Conservative views rooted in local interpretations of Islamic law have fuelled debates about women's education and women's leadership, among many other topics in recent years (Al-Rasheed 2013). Some commentators claim it is enshrined in the Holy Qur'an that women should not be leaders (Vidyasagar and Rea 2004). Apoplectic clashes between liberal reformers and conservative 'ulamā' have become notorious in the media (Meijer 2010). The arguments put forth by conservative commentators act as a powerful obstacle to women's full participation in leadership. However, it is important to note, as Hamdan (2005) argues, that it is cultural practices, which result in strict patriarchal interpretations of Islam, not the Islamic religion per se, that contribute to gender inequality in Saudi Arabia. This results in dominant discourses, which have power because they are held to represent knowledge and truth (Foucault 1972). Deconstruction of these dominant discourses, associated texts and narrative, would allow new meanings and counter discourses to emerge. Studies of

law and interpretations of Islam in Saudi society may also throw new light on the debates surrounding women's suitability for leadership.

Secondly, gender segregation has a significant impact on all aspects of professional life in Saudi Arabia (Elamin and Omair 2010). However, the notion that this is detrimental to women's career advancement is contested. At one end of the debate, Doumato (2000) argues that gender segregation is a major factor in women's underrepresentation in the workforce. Combined studies by Metcalfe (2006, 2007, 2008, 2011) suggest that gender segregation has given rise to gender based occupations, sustained patriarchal organisational structures, and it is the cause of limited professional support and mentoring for women. However, contrasting perspectives include the view that gender segregation can give women a professional advantage as they do not have to compete with men in women only spaces (Hamdan 2005).

It is important to note that 'the practice of seclusion of Arab Muslim women is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Historically Muslim Arab women participated in all aspects of life politically, socially, and economically' (Hamdan 2005, p. 45). Al-Rasheed (2013) attributes changing practices to Islamic nationalism<sup>2</sup> and oil wealth (2012). She argues that since the 1980s, in particular, restrictive interpretations of Islam have been used, not only to further limit women's visibility in public space, but to emphasise women's emotionality so as to discredit women as being suited to public and state positions. Like Le Renard (2008), Al-Rasheed (2013) argues that wealth created through the oil industry diminished the need for women's salaries as a means of sustaining the family and, subsequently, women not working became a symbol of wealth and moral standing. In addition, she points out that fatwas<sup>3</sup> on women, requiring them to deal with minute aspects of their appearance and lifestyle, became notorious with the rise in oil wealth (Al-Rasheed 2013, p. 120). This caused many Saudi women to view themselves as protected 'jewels' and gain a reputation as 'educated but idle women' (Al-Rasheed 2013, p. 23). Furthermore, oil wealth marginalized women because it made 'controlling women affordable' and 'separating them from the public sphere very affordable' through gender segregation and the exponential development of women only banks, universities and other public spaces (Al-Rasheed and Azzam 2012, p. 7). Further research is needed to fully understand the impact of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia, not just on women and their careers but on men, businesses and institutions, the economy, and society itself. Taking a constructionist approach, researchers may expose power relations between men and women by exploring gender segregation discourse, policy and/or practice.

Thirdly, a significant and highly controversial legislative obstacle to women's advancement into leadership is the male guardianship system. It has been described as one of the most humiliating of all experiences (Fatany 2013). Under guardianship law, a female is considered a minor throughout her life. This means she is not able to make decisions about herself (Quamar 2016). Since personal status law dictates that 'an unmarried adult is the ward of her father, a married women is the ward of her husband and a widowed woman is the ward of her sons' (Mobaraki and Söderfeldt 2010), females live under a male guardian for life (Quamar 2016). Therefore, men are responsible for female family members and their permission is required when a woman wishes to travel (Al Alhareth et al. 2015). In addition, women are required to have a male guardian to accompany them when travelling outside Saudi Arabia, although many do travel without a male guardian (Al-Rasheed and Azzam 2012). Vidyasagar and Rea (2004, p. 262) argue that the constitution prevents gender equality by restricting women's freedom to travel, to access education and to work under guardianship rules (p. 262). Added to this, Saudi Arabia is the only country in the world to prohibit women from driving, hence, women are severely restricted

<sup>2</sup> Al-Rasheed and Azzam (2012, p. 5) explains 'Religious nationalism is actually about constructing community, very much like nationalism. It is based on certain mythologies about the family, the nation as a family and the place of women in the family and in the nation.'

<sup>3</sup> A fatwā is an Islamic legal pronouncement, issued by an expert in religious law (mufti) (The Islamic Supreme Council of America 2017).

in their freedom of movement, especially travelling for work purposes (Mobaraki and Söderfeldt 2010). This has resulted in fierce criticism from commentators.

Thus, two royal decrees, announced in 2017, mark a significant turning point for women's liberation in Saudi Arabia. The first royal decree will relax the country's guardianship laws. It is anticipated to come into force by the end of 2017. The second royal decree, announced in September 2017, will reverse the driving ban placed on women. It is expected to be implemented in June 2018. While the announcement to relax guardianship laws generated positive responses, many observers remain cautious about whether the proposed changes will be implemented effectively in practice. Still, proposed changes in guardianship law offer women a ray of hope that systematic injustices pertaining to their freedom of movement will be lifted. Future research will be needed to monitor the extent to which changes in guardianship law are implemented in practice. Large scale quantitative studies would provide evidence of this and help to identify problems that may impede progress. Longitudinal research will be necessary to track change over time. In addition, understanding how changes in guardianship law impacts on women qualitatively through exploration of their lived experience may also prove fruitful for researchers and policy makers. Future research will also be needed to understand the impact of the ruling allowing women to drive, on women's lives and work, as well as the economy.

Fourth, traditional ideology appears to be having a powerful influence on social attitudes toward women. Empirical research in Saudi Arabia confirms that Saudi men have developed more 'traditional attitudes towards working females', in recent years. Saudi men strongly believe 'the premise that men are dominant, independent, competitive and capable of leadership and women are submissive, dependent, caring and good for domestic tasks and child rearing' (Elamin and Omair 2010, p. 758). It is of concern that these studies contradict earlier research in the region (Mostafa 2003, 2005), which had reported that attitudes towards women who work were becoming less traditional. Elamin and Omair (2010) suggest the return to traditional values may be associated with Saudi Arabia's strict Islamic teachings and cultural values. Despite advancements in women's education, women are, therefore, expected to give priority to their family not a career (Al-Ahmadi 2011). Although this can cause some women to abandon their goals and become satisfied with staying at home and waiting for marriage, many women have learnt to use 'legitimate' religious language, which cannot be challenged to achieve their goals (Hamdan 2005). In depth narrative studies, combined with fine grained socio-linguistic analyses or analytical approaches such as discursive psychology, as well as discourse analysis may take this research in new directions.

Fifth, many forms of discrimination present additional barriers to women's career advancement in Saudi Arabia (Al-Ahmadi 2011). In addition to discrimination in the hiring process, the profound social and cultural barriers that exist (Al-Ahmadi 2011; Alomair 2015) can influence a woman's decision to pursue leadership. Added to this, debates surrounding women's leadership can cause people to question women's leadership abilities. Other barriers concern perceptions of women's impartiality and independence, which are considered key qualities of leaders (Northouse 2015). This is often of concern to employers in Saudi Arabia because cultural convention dictates that a woman will impart discussions and even workplace practices to her father or husband (Al Alhareth et al. 2013). Since this can result in women not being considered independent or impartial compared to their male counterparts in the workplace, employers may be deterred from giving women the opportunity to be the leaders (Al Alhareth et al. 2013). The research community has a role to play countering traditional myths and prejudices by highlighting the contribution that women leaders make in the workplace and society.

Finally, new initiatives such as 'Saudi vision 2030' and 'Saudi female leaders' announced in April 2016 by the Chairman of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs, include 'The National Transformation Plan 2020' (Saudi Vision 2017). The National Transformation Plan's goal is to increase the percentage of women in leadership positions by 2020. The plan includes a multitude of initiatives to support this goal, such as training programmes for women leaders, reforms and legislation, which can help to improve the condition of women's lives. Future research should include evaluation of the

impact of the new national transformation plan on women in Saudi Arabia. Research is needed to establish if the Saudi vision for women's empowerment is being accomplished and how it can be extended. Research is also needed to understand the nature of initiatives to support women in the Saudi context, and how women experience and benefit from various kinds of interventions, such as mentoring, networking, training and so forth. Longitudinal research would track the impact on women's careers over time. Research in the region also needs to take new directions that incorporate constructivist and constructionist approaches to understand the subjective experience of women, to explore how women construct their identity, as well new novel studies into identity work and/or identify regulation, which will be particularly pertinent during these times of change.

## 9. Conclusions

Saudi Arabia is a country that is in the midst of social change (Alyami 2016); yet, key aspects of change such as women's participation in waged work, and especially women's leadership, have received limited attention from the academic community. In this paper, we provided an overview of the current state of women's leadership, focusing on the higher education context, and discussed proposals for future research directions. New policies and initiatives that aim to improve women's freedom of movement, their participation in the workplace and in leadership, provide the academic community with a rich source of research material.

History has witnessed a gargantuan shift in attitudes towards education for Saudi females over the past five decades, which despite the severe restrictions placed on Saudi women has resulted in the percentage of women graduating from higher education reaching record levels (Abalkhail and Allan 2015). Many women have carved out successful careers in higher education and other sectors. This strongly suggests that many Saudi Arabian women want to have the same career opportunities as women in other parts of the World. If government policies and plans for women's advancement in the workplace and into leadership mirror successes achieved in education, Saudi Arabian women may reap the benefits over the coming years. This should be viewed as a work in progress, to which the academic community can contribute through empirical research and scholarly work.

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